



# REMEMBERING PAST: A NEW HISTORICAL STUDY OF RITA CHOWDHURY'S MAKAM

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## ABSTRACT

Post-independence Assamese novels record different aspects of the changing scenario in the society. As most of them deal with the present socio-political problems of the society some take in hand unique and unrevealed chapters of Assam history as background of their writings. Rita Chowdhury, one of the renowned writers of Assam adopts the second method. After her successful novel *Deo langkhui* (The Divine Sword) based on a historical evidence of Tiwa kingdom, *Makam* (The Golden Horse) is a tale of Assam's past related to Chino-Indian war. In the novel the writer does not simply describes the past events, she also gives the readers chances to analyze the same story from different perspectives. Her unique way of storytelling through two parallel narratives offers an unconscious journey from present to past or past to present. It focuses on both public and private 'memory' of one part of Assam's history.

**KEYWORDS:** New Historicism, Chino-Indian War, Self and Other, Hybridization, Thick Description.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

From the very beginning of Assamese fiction we see the writers like Padmanath Gohain Baruah, Lakshminath Bezbaruah and Rajanikanta Bordoloi etc. to use the issues of Assam history as background of their writing. The post-independence period has witnessed a growing enthusiasm in the production of fiction in Assam. After independence experiment in the technique of storytelling has been made in various directions. Writers of the present era experimented and explored new areas and techniques in their works. Indira Goswami, Chandraprasad Saikia, Lakshminandan Borah, Arupa Patangia Kalita and Rita Chowdhury are notable among them. Rita Chowdhury has won Sahitya Akademi award in 2008 for her novel *Deou Langkhui*.

Her novel *Makam* (2010) renovates a closed chapter of Assam's history. The novel deals with the lives of the Chinese people who brought to India by British as tea garden workers during Britishraj in India. After many years of settlement they had to leave Assam as a consequent of Chino-Indian war in 1962. The novel also gives ample light on the lives of tea tribes of Odisha brought to Assam by British to work in the tea gardens. Both groups were treated inhumanly by the power groups as the novel unfolds their status and condition at that time particularly in Assam and India in general.

New historicism is a new genre developed in literature. In her novel *Makam*, Chowdhury touches the history which is neglected and not written by many historians. This paper is an attempt to analyze *Makam* from new historical perspective.

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

This study of the novel analyses the novel from new historical perspective and it will also recourse to post-colonialism. Only secondary data are used in this paper. The Secondary data are collected from articles published in various books, journals, books and websites.

## 3. ANALYSIS:

New historicism and its practitioners seek to find meaning in text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. They insist that ideology manifests itself in literary productions and discourse, interest themselves in the interpretive constructions which the members of a society or culture apply to their experience. In his book "A History of Literary Criticism" M.A.R. Habib mentions that:

The new historicism questions its own methodological assumptions, and is less concerned with treating literary works as model of organic unity than as "fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses." (Habib, 2006).

Here, in this novel also the writer tells different dimensions of past history through the voices of multiple characters. Many characters from Europe, Assam and other parts of India and China take part in the storytelling and it gives the novel a unique polyphonic voice. Thus the novel is also applying multiple narrative techniques to shift its concern from one to another historical instance.

This multiple narrative technique helps to establish the novel as a history of common men or history from below. It facilitates the voices of common Chinese people like Ho Han, Maileen, Yuyee, Aahleen and many others. Maileen remembers her early life in Assam forgotten by the betrayal of Indian authority. Her forefa-

thers came to Assam as an urgent need of workers in the newly started tea gardens and they lived here from middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the early days of arrival they were treated inhumanly and had to work hard in the tea industry. After spending many years in Assam the new generation Chinese people started to believe themselves as Assamese, however the Chino-Indian war and its consequence changed their fate and identity forever. These common Chinese-Assamese people were never given any chance to choose their living place. Most of them were sent back to China in a very pathetic condition. They became rootless. These activities by Indian government made them silent or voiceless. In this novel the writer tries to give voices to those subalterns who remained silent throughout history.

'New Historicism relates an alternative history, presents transcripts that are not only "hidden" but also crooked, misquoted, gibbous, and defaced. It digs out the powerfully disturbing anecdotes that incubate within booming triumphalist histories' (Veese, 1991).

The narrator and writer Arunabh Borah digs out the history of these Chinese-Assamese people after an accidental meeting with Laileen; daughter of a Chinese mother and an Assamese father. He mentions this history 'as an unimaginable past; that is still connected to painful present' (Chowdhury, 2010)

After many years of colonial settings by Britishers, the newly formed government in India failed to view these half Assamese people as 'Indians' and considered them as 'others'. These marginalized people were never acknowledged for their contribution to Assamese society. The writer tries to unfold those 'unrecognised' contributions of the silent contributors. The name of the novel is itself an account of these people's contribution to Assamese society. In Cantonese the word 'makam' means golden horse. Makum, the name of a town of Tinsukia district of Assam derived from this word 'makam'. Before Chino-Indian war of 1962 many Chinese people were lived in this Makum town. Thus as a new historic book *Makam* is an attempt to explain "power relation" and inextricable link between these two nations. India's flawed foreign policy at that time of war was also responsible for inhumane treatment to these people.

'Thick description' is a term frequently used in new historical study. New historicists take texts as 'thick descriptions' of culture. In his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture" Clifford Geertz explains the term 'thick description' that was originally coined by philosopher Gilbert Ryle. It is a way of analyzing detailed and minutely observed social and cultural practices. The book *Makam* also includes detailed and minutely description of social and cultural practices of Chinese-Assamese people, the tea-tribes and other people of Assam. The styles, festivals, customs of these people are described in the novel in a very deliberate way. The chinapattis, marriage rituals of Chinese and tea tribe people, various Chinese tales, description of Chinese stores, graveyards etc. make this description more candid. It is believed that cultural motifs and behavioral codes allow for a view point to society's understanding. We see a kind of cultural assimilation among these people as they created martial relationship with other native people and tea tribes of Assam. This assimilation set up a new hybridized society in Assam. Makum is a product of this hybridized Assamese society and culture.

These Chinese-Assamese people are in a way representatives of all the poor groups victimized and suffered from different socio-political-economical compulsions. They are symbolic of the weaker section of any society irrespective of

national boundaries. They came to India in search of a better life from China but always deprived of their rights and privileges in the hands of the power groups. Like these Chinese- Assamese people the tea-tribe people were also brought to Assam by British to work in the tea-gardens. They are also weaker section and silent subalterns.

New historicists celebrate all forms of difference and deviance. Foucault in his discursive practice believes that there is always a multiplicity of discourses –so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in the family as in layers of government (Barry, 2008). This multiplicity is evident in the course of the novel *Makam*. We get multiple perspective and different experiences in the novel. From the very first narrator Arunabh Borah to the forefathers of Maileen , Ho Han and the British officer Charles all these narrators give the novel an eventful description from 19<sup>th</sup> century to present time. New historicism acknowledges and embraces the idea that as times change so will our understanding of great literature. In this novel also the multiple narratives and historical setting offer different dimensions to explore by its readers.

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Thus the novel stands as a new historical novel by facilitating multiplicity in narrative and descriptions. It also sheds light to the forgotten part of the history of Assam by giving the war victims a chance to speak. It is a history from below that successfully relates cruel time of that era. In the afterword the writer Chowdhury comments that by writing these painful stories of forgotten past she cannot return those beautiful days to these groups of people or cannot erase the memory of their agonizing past. All that she can do is to take these stories to the common people. She hopes that common people and media will help these people if ever time repeats such kind of war again. It is an attempt of her to do something for those 'unheard voices' throughout time.

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